

"The Lord's Supper" is not the Eucharist, commonly called the Communion. It is not the Passover meal. It is not the fulfillment of any Old Testament type. It was definitely intended by our Lord to be something new that He was giving. The old economy was to be submerged into the new, and never forget that Jesus Christ definitely had the authority from God the Father to effect the ordinances of the Christian church.

To any discerning believer who reads the New Testament carefully it must be apparent that our blessed Lord "on the same night in which he was betrayed" instituted a new service which was to be perpetuated by His followers "till he come." That first service was held in an upper room in which there was a table spread with food to be eaten in a special fellowship never before enjoyed by the disciples with their Lord.

#### **Scriptural Authority and Observance**

Beginning with the first Gospel, we learn that Matthew clearly understood what went on in the upper room. "They did eat" (Matt. 26:21), "they were eating" (26:26) *before* Jesus took bread and the cup and passed them in the manner of the Eucharist which is commonly observed by practically every Christian church today.

Mark agrees concerning this upper room experience, for he says: "And as they sat and did eat, Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, One of you which eateth [a meal] with me shall betray me" (Mark 14:18). Jesus identifies the eating as "dipping in the dish" (a common form of meal in the Orient), and this took place *before* He took bread and the cup and instituted the Eucharist (Mark 14:22-23).

The physician Luke unmistakably tells us: "Likewise also the cup *after supper*" (Luke 22:20). To this the Apostle Paul refers and agrees in writing to the Corinthians: "After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped [after supper, that is]" (I Cor. 11:25). In the same chapter Paul writes to correct the abuses of the Corinthians in eating "the Lord's Supper" (11:20). This simply means that they were observing a special meal in addition to

# **The Lord's Supper: a Fellowship Meal**

*By Robert E. A. Gale, California*

the bread and the cup, but they were abusing the method and meaning of eating the supper.

When they came together in one place, each one ate the supper which he brought. Some who ate too much became drunken, others who were poor went hungry (both groups missing the point of the meal entirely, cf. 11:22, 34), and no one waited for the other (11:33). Here it becomes quite evident that the Corinthians had thus robbed themselves of the great blessing intended by our Lord in giving us this ordinance of the fellowship meal. For it was fellowship and not food that was to be uppermost in the observance.

Jude sensed this defection in the Early Church. Writing to warn the true Christians concerning the apostate teachers who had already crept into their midst, he declares emphatically that they are "spots" (ASV., "hidden rocks") in your feasts of charity (literally, "love-feasts"), "when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear" (Jude 12). Peter was alert to the same situation and so he wrote: "Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you" (II Pet. 2:13). It is clear therefore that the Christian church did observe the eating of the love feast, the fellowship meal. In the very corrections that were necessitated by the abuses that arose it is shown that they did follow the practice of eating a separate meal during the gathering together in one place. It is also evident that the chief purpose of the meal was fellowship, the unity of the believers in their common faith. The false brethren, the apostate teachers, the greedy members broke this unity of fellowship, and thus marred the eating of the Lord's Supper.

It was that first service in the upper room that Jesus had set forth

the pattern for His disciples. "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this [a new Christ-like love—not merely the previously commanded "Love-thy-neighbor-as-thyself" love] shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). Love and fellowship characterized the early Christians. The fellowship meal emphasized that and reminded the followers of the Lord that fellowship made the vast difference between them and the pagans. God grant that this shall be true of His followers today!

#### **Historical Authenticity and Observance**

All historical evidence proves beyond a doubt that the love feast was observed as an ordinance in the Christian church from its very inception. This is consistent with the Scriptural inference. For as we have noted, the purpose of the meal was fellowship and not food; therefore it is just as symbolic and just as much of an ordinance as either of the other two parts of the threefold service.

Historical citations are numerous, but three of them will suffice to show the preponderance of weight they throw on the side of observing the fellowship meal in connection with the Eucharist.

*The Didache*, commonly known as the Teaching of the Twelve, dates back to the first century A.D. In chapter 9 there is a model given for prayer before the meal is taken. In chapter 10 a prayer is given for use after the meal.

In a letter written to Dognetus, Ignatius says of early Christians, "They have a common meal." His testimony is counted valuable because he was contemporaneous with the apostles and died only twelve years

# Brethren Missionary Herald

## May 20, 1961

after John the Apostle. Thus we have both the *Didache* and the letters of Ignatius, written under the very supervision of the apostles, testifying that the love feast was a church ordinance.

Dr. Philip Schaff, noted church historian, true to the facts of history without bias to present-day practices, gives us this record: "At first the communion was joined with a love feast, and was then celebrated in the evening, in memory of the last supper of Jesus with His disciples . . . Tertillian (about A.D. 160) gives a detailed description of the Agape [Greek for love feast] in refutation of the shameless calumnies of the heathen. But the growth of the churches and the rise of manifold abuses led to the gradual disuse and in the fourth century even to the formal prohibition of the Agape, which belonged in fact only to the childhood and first love of the church. It was a family feast, where rich and poor, master and slave met on the same footing, partaking of a simple meal, hearing reports from distant congregations, contributing to the necessities of suffering brethren, and encouraging each other in their daily duties and trials" (*History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II, pp. 239, 240).

### Current Observance

It is true that very few Christian groups literally observe the threefold service as it was instituted by our Lord in the upper room. Although practically all authorities agree that the earliest churches observed the washing of the saints' feet, the fellowship meal, and the communion of the bread and the cup, gradually, just as Dr. Schaff noted above in the case of the meal, the service as it is largely observed today has been narrowed down to the simplest and easiest form—merely the communion

of the bread and the cup, known as the Eucharist. But thank God there are some left upon the earth who believe in taking God at His Word and who are not afraid nor put to too much bother to observe literally the threefold service.

The Brethren Church is not the only church which observes this type of service, but it is among the very few who do.

God's Word says nothing about the details of the food used in the meal. This is to be expected since the emphasis is upon fellowship and not food. Any food which is symbolic of a common meal is in harmony with the Word of God.

It is refreshing to enjoy a service where godly conversation is encouraged during the fellowship meal. Indeed it is hard to believe in any kind of fellowship where there is no communicating of godly thoughts. A time of praise and testimony at the close of the meal serves to break up the ever-present danger of formality, and the mere going through motions. In older congregations schooled against this added blessing such an innovation will come only after patience and much teaching. But the results are worth the effort. God grant that the Brethren shall come to appreciate more and more the value of genuine fellowship one with the other in Christ.

Perhaps in some cases the time element has forbidden the praise and testimony. More time is allowed for this if the bread and the individual cups are placed on the tables before the service begins. After all, there is nothing to be gained by the mechanics of passing the elements in a way that consumes unnecessary time. The unity gained in all breaking bread together and drinking the cup together enhances the underlying meaning of the fellowship meal itself.

Our fellowship this side of heaven is just a foretaste of that which awaits us in glory with our blessed Lord at the "marriage supper of the Lamb." It is John in The Revelation who points forward to that glorious day when we shall all be seated together in the banquet hall of heaven.

"Let us be glad and rejoice [even now], and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready [God help us to be ready when He comes] . . . Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:7, 9).

We could not be far wrong in harmonizing this future event with that about which Paul speaks to the Ephesians concerning the bride of Christ: "That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

This future ministry of our Lord is spiritually discerned here. Every Christian must be glorified before we sit down at the table up yonder. This is promised to us through the ministry of the Lord Jesus. "When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2). "We look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body" (Phil. 3:20-21).

Don't forget what Luke records as coming from the Lord himself, "Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when he cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that he shall gird himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them" (Luke 12:37).

Christian, be faithful, watch, wait expectantly for His coming—look for Him! And thank God for the fellowship of the saints now! What a different world this would be today were all to sit down at the Lord's table as He has provided. Labor trouble, political trouble, frictions and factions, schisms and isms would disappear.

May it be said of us as it was said of the early brethren: "Behold! How these Christians love one another!"